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A BRIEF HISTORY OF HITCHIN MARKETS AND FAIRS

by ANTHONY M. FOSTER

Hitchin, or Hicca, its earliest known name, has certainly been in existence since the 7th century, and there is even evidence of pre-Roman origin. Frederic Seebohm, using the evidence of the open field system of husbandry he found at Hitchin, went to considerable lengths to prove continuity between pre-Roman agricultural methods and those in use many centuries later. The Romans themselves apparently colonised the neighbourhood with farmsteads and other settlements, although not in the form of a town similar to Verulamium. Hitchin could be said to be a typical example of a highway town, that is, one that has grown up on an extended linear plan for the purpose of trade. It stood at the junction of several important trackways, its original wide main street being common to an east-west route and a north-south route. Added impetus to the town's development was given by the establishment here of a Religious House in 792. Hitchin was, it appears, the largest centre of population between St. Albans and Bedford and thus ideally situated to serve as a centre for trade and administration.

Markets and Fairs have been held in England since Saxon times, to provide a means of barter and trade. Markets were originally for localised trading, while Fairs were for larger scale commerce. The Royal Commission which investigated matters relating to markets and fairs in 1888 defined the difference between the two as follows "it is commonly stated that fairs are larger than markets and are held only on a few stated days in the year, whereas markets are held once a week or more". Both markets and fairs existed side by side from the very earliest days of exchanging goods and services. They provided outlets to the local craftsmen, to travelling chapman or pedlars, and to householders and small farmers, where beasts and surplus products could be sold and purchased. Already by the 9th century regulations were being issued in some parts of the country to ensure that transactions were fairly and properly conducted under supervision. Owners of manors and ecclesiastic authorities were quick to realise that here was a ready source of revenue, and before long a system of tolls developed. Being a Royal Manor, the market tolls at Hitchin belonged to the Crown. It was therefore the manor which administered and regulated the market and of course the fairs too. A market has been held at Hitchin by prescription for many centuries.³

After the Norman Conquest, William I decreed that markets should only be held in places where it was possible to provide proper control by force of arms. This meant that trading now had to be confined to cities, walled towns or secure places where men at arms were to be found. Hitchin does not appear to have been a fortified town and for this reason may well have suffered restrictions to its trading, like many other English market towns in the 11th century. Certainly the Domesday survey of 1086 makes no mention of a market here.

In the 12th century, however, motte-and-bailey castles garrisoned for King Stephen were built on each side of the town at Pirton and Wymondley. These fortifications may well have provided the security to permit the continuation of the market. A track linking the Pirton castle site with Hitchin had certainly existed since pre-Saxon times.⁴

It cannot be without significance that the roads from both Wymondley and Pirton cross the wide main street of Hitchin at Golden Square, the site of the old market cross until the Reformation.⁵ This symbol of the influence of religion on the market served to remind the people of their duty to the Church. The decline of this influence after the 16th century is given emphasis by the very fact that the site of the market cross hence forward became the swine market.

The Norman laws relating to markets were somewhat relaxed in the 13th century, and once again trade and barter began to develop in undefended towns. A market franchise was by now a valuable asset. Furthermore, Hitchin being an important Royal manor and soke after the conquest, the tolls would be well worth the Crown retaining. There is no evidence from the entries in the Domesday survey that the town was a Borough. It was probably not until the middle of the 12th century, when the manor was held for the King by the Baliols, that it developed into a rudimentary borough. By 1268 there is evidence that the borough was being farmed to burgesses at a rent of 8½ marks. Hitchin continued to be called a borough in 1375/6, but it was not fully developed, and no evidence is found of Burgage rents. The town never received a charter of incorporation and never returned a member to Parliament before the 19th century. It was one of numerous little manorial towns which existed throughout England with varying liberties which bordered upon borough rights. Much of the prosperity in the town in medieval times arose, as in many other English market towns, from the expansion of the wool trade. It may well be that it was in this period that Hitchin acquired such borough rights as one finds recorded.

The distance a man could walk in a day, to and from the market, determined how far the early market towns of 12th century England were from each other. The more perishable items sold in the market, such as vegetables, dairy products and fruit, were not carried great distances because of the primitive travelling conditions: livestock, grain and wool, on the other hand, were goods that would travel great distances without deteriorating, and therefore probably came from much further afield. Then there were the products of the local Hitchin craftsmen — the tanners, weavers, smiths, shoemakers, tailors and so on — nearly all of which were made locally and sold for use within 20 miles of the town.

No market consisted entirely of goods for sale; there were also the rogues, vagabonds, chapman and pedlars of all kinds, quack doctors, fortune tellers, tumblers, minstrels, dancers and many others who made market days ones of fun and frolic. The weekly market at Hitchin seems to have been held on a Tuesday from time immemorial, for in medieval times it was unlawful to change the market day without Royal Licence, unless the change were from a Sunday to an ordinary weekday. The holders of the market tolls in the nearby towns of Luton and Potton defaulted in this matter in 1203 and were called to account at Bedford — both pleas were however eventually allowed.⁸

With the passage of time the stalls, which had been set up for trading in the broad and lengthy main street, running from Silver Street to Tilehouse Street, began to take on a more permanent character. The stallholders no longer removed their stalls after the market was over. Some even began to both work and live at their stalls; others converted the ground floors of their existing houses into primitive shops. Such encroachments on the wide main streets occurred in many English market towns. Not only were the market streets built over, but also the spaces between the earlier houses were also filled in to give a continuous line of stalls or shops facing towards the street. By the end of the 14th century very little remained of Hitchin's original single main street: in 1470 we have evidence of continuous tenure of at least two stalls in the town which even then had been leased for 40 years. ⁹

Priority was always given to local traders, and a bell was always rung before trading was allowed to begin. At Hitchin a bellhouse was specially built in the centre of what is now the old market square, to start off buying and selling. A Bellman or "Towler" (Toller) for the market bell is mentioned in the records of the town's manorial courts from the beginning of the 17th century. Here too we find the appointment of other market officials, all of whom must have played their part in regulating Hitchin's early markets. There was the Town Crier for spreading news and making announcements, the Leather Searcher and Sealer for approving the tannery products, and the Ale Taster to keep a check on brewing.

A good deal of competition existed for market stalls and local traders guarded their rights as townsmen jealously. In 1663, for instance, some of the tradesmen and inhabitants of Hitchin petitioned the Justices in Quarter Sessions, claiming that persons living in other towns kept shops and stocks in Hitchin and did great trade there on market days to the detriment of the petitions. The foreigners had been taxed but had refused to pay.¹⁰

By the 16th century Hitchin was becoming famous as a grain market, particularly for corn, which had been sold here, even then, for over 300 years. Not unnaturally, malting and brewing, the two main by-products of a grain market, were also increasing locally. Queen Elizabeth I acknowledged the importance of Hitchin grain when, after listening to a Spanish Nobleman expounding the qualities of his country's vineyards, she replied, "My Hitchin grapes surpass them or those of any country". 11

Daniel Defoe, who wrote Robinson Crusoe, writing in the 1720s described Hitchin as "a large market town and particularly eminent for its being a great market for wheat and malt, but especially the first which is brought here for the London market. The road to Hitchin and thence to Bedford tho' not a great thoroughfare for travellers, yet is a very useful highway for the multitude of carriages which bring wheat from Bedford to the market, and from the country round it, even as far as Northamptonshire and the edge of Leicestershire". ¹²

The corn market at Hitchin had many ups and downs in its long history. It had always been unsettled by war and pestilence; the Wars of the Roses saw a serious decline in trading, as did the Civil War in the 17th century. In 1638, just before the outbreak of war between Charles I and Parliament, the local justices were hard put to deal with a situation caused to poor people "by reason of the dearthe of corn and want of worke is so extreme in the market town of Hitchin that many have pawned and sold their goods". Even after the King was beheaded in 1649, the inhabitants of Hitchin were signing a petition complaining of this "towle of markets that non may sell their corne". In 1730 conditions were so bad in the town that 158 people died of smallpox and the market had to be held on Butts Close: trading was extremely difficult as dealers were not allowed to approach one another. Payments were left at one place and goods picked up in another.

By the 16th century the retailing of goods and services was increasing; a new class of merchants and wholesalers was growing up in England. No longer was the producer selling directly to the consumer; goods were being purchased by middlemen and sold to retailers for profit. Although meeting considerable opposition initially from local craftsmen and traders, the system gradually became more dominant despite attempts to regulate it by law. The towns of Hertfordshire and other Home Counties, by providing markets where goods were sold to merchants for the consumption of Londoners, waxed rich in the process. Hitchin's corn, barley, wheat, malt and livestock were purchased by the wholesalers for reselling in the London markets for profit. In the 19th century strong commercial interests and a developing straw plait market compelled the consideration of Saturday as a second Market day. By 1829 Hitchin's Bell House was removed and the Church bells were rung to indicate the start of business. The Saturday market which now developed was more and more concerned with retail trading and commercial interests, while the Tuesday market continued to be essentially concerned with farming and agriculture. The Manor Courts met in one of the stalls in the Market Place from the earliest times and here were paid all the tolls due from the stallholders and traders. This Manor Court House stood at the top of the Market Place facing down Cock Street until, like the Bell House, it was removed to allow the Bedford Turnpike Trust to widen the road.¹⁵

Shops selling retail goods produced elsewhere than in the town began to appear early in the 19th century, as the industrial revolution began to sweep aside cottage industries. Much of the trading once carried on in Hitchin's weekly market was now to be found every day of the week in local shops.

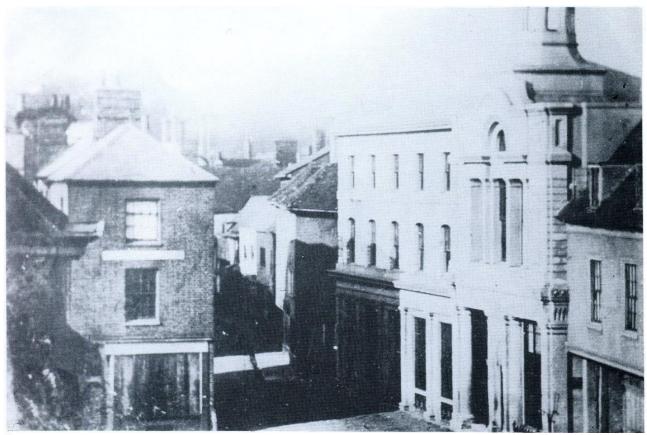
The industrial revolution speeded up the gradual change that had been taking place from market shopping to daily consumer retailing. It was increasingly the more well-to-do who used the shops, while the poor foraged in the markets where bargains were more readily found. By 1848 it became necessary for Hitchin tradesmen to publish a notice that in future no shops would open on a Sunday.

Before going into the tremendous changes made to Hitchin Markets by the Industrial Revolution let us briefly look at the history of local fairs. It may well be that Hitchin fair is even older than the weekly market. At least the town does not hold its annual fair by prescription, and charters to hold fairs are much easier to find. But one must not think of fairs in terms of the modern equivalent, with its swings, roundabouts and coconut shies. Fairs did not become devoted entirely to pleasure until the 19th century: before that they had been the means of doing the nation's large scale buying and selling, particularly of livestock. The element of pleasure was there, however, for the annual fair was always an excuse for several days of merrymaking.

Hitchin's first charter to hold a fair was granted in 1221 by King Henry III to the Baliol family, who held the Manor for the King. Unfortunately, however, this famous family fell into disgrace when they strove to seize the throne of Scotland. The Crown therefore took away both the Manor and the right to the tolls arising from the town's fairs. Edward II granted a new charter in 1318 to the Kendale family who had been given the manorial rights by his father Edward 1, some years earlier. The Kendales benefited from the tolls of Hitchin fairs until 1375, when once again they reverted to the King, Edward III, there being no male issue to continue the line.

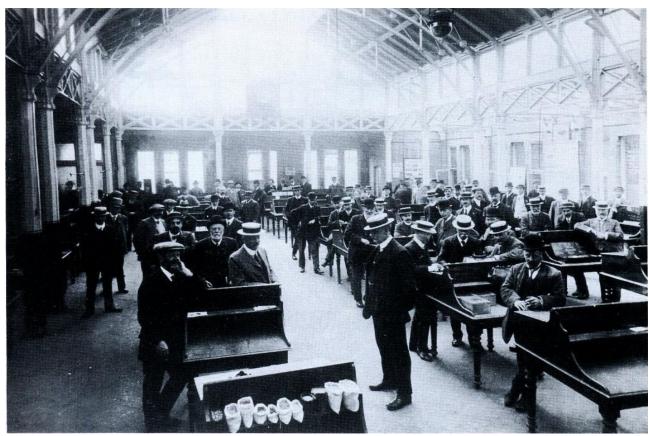
For a brief period in 1376, Edward HI gave the Manor and its fair tolls to his mistress, Alice Perrers. She quickly fell from favour, so they returned once again to the Crown. The Kings of England seem to have hung on to the income from Hitchin's fairs for the next century until, following the seizure of power by Edward IV they were granted to local interests. Thus in 1475 the Crown gave them to the Master and Wardens of the Hitchin fraternity known as "Our Ladys Guild" or Brotherhood. The Master of the Brotherhood was a local man, Sir John Sturgeon; he was a member of the Wool Staple of Calais, a rich wool merchant who later became Lord Mayor of London. In 1453 he had led an insurrection at Hitchin against the former King Henry VI. The charter granted by Edward IV gave the Brotherhood, as part of its endowment, the right to receive "the issues, profits, customs and amercements of two fairs on the Wednesday in Easter week and the feast of St. Edward King and Confessor". Each fair was of three days duration. To keep the peace the brotherhood was given the privilege to hold Courts of Pie Powder. This rather curious name arises from a corruption of the old French words for pedlar, "Pied Pouldre" or "Dusty Feet". It ensured rapid justice to itinerant chapmen or traders. The Brotherhood held the tolls of Hitchin fairs until they were repossessed in 1548, around the time of the dissolution of the monasteries. Edward VI, who had now succeeded his father, Henry VIII, granted the tolls and most of the property belonging to the Brotherhood to Randolph Burgh and Robert Beverly. By the end of the 16th century, the town was holding three fairs annually; in Easter week, on St. Edwards Day and at Michaelmas. These fairs were leased to John Fitzacherly in 1595, but by 1792 only two annual fairs took place, each one lasting one day, an arrangement which continued with an additional day following each, until the 20th century. By then however they were entirely commercial and devoted to pleasure, with the mechanical organs of Abbot or Thurston braying out across the once quiet Archery Butts in Bedford Road.

The opening of the Great Northern Railway between London and Peterborough in August 1850 caused the citizens of Hitchin, particularly those concerned with farming, to think of the expansion of their trade. Accordingly on 10th September 1850 a public meeting was held at the Town Hall when the following resolutions were passed:



The Marketplace in 1854, with the newly opened Corn Exchange on the right.

The building on the left is the Shambles.



The interior of the Corn Exchenge around 1917.



The Marketplace around 1893, selling both produce (above) and farm equipment (below).





The Cattle Market Committee in West Lane, 1903. Left to right: W. Seymour, W. Willmott, Lawson Thompson, A. Doughty, A.J. Blood, and W. Foster, a spectator.



West Lane, shortly after the new market had been opened.



The Lairage around 1910. The building in the background is the Infirmary.



Jackson's Saleyard on Paynes Park, with the Museum beyond.

- 1. "That the opening of the Great Northern Railway affords an opportunity for extending and improving the trade of the district connected with Hitchin market and it will be highly beneficial to the trade of the town.
- 2. That the erection of a corn exchange at Hitchin is essential to the prosperity of the market and a great convenience to the corn dealers, maltsters and others attending the market."

On 19th September William Lucas, who chaired this meeting, went with John Hawkins as legal adviser to London to see if the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, who now held, Hitchin market tolls on behalf of the Crown, would allow them to be purchased. The Lease of the manor had expired in 1843, and now once more the ancient privileges attached to it were in the hands of the Crown, although this no longer implied that the manorial dues and tolls represented the personal income of the Monarch. Lucas felt there was "the greatest apathy in our town as to all improvement". Nevertheless he accepted the Secretaryship of the new market committee. Enquiries were now made as to suitable premises for the new market, and four properties were soon under consideration. These were all in Cock Street with the exception of one, the Red Lion Inn on Market Hill, which figures so vividly in Samuel Lucas's painting of the market in 1840. Not only was this the best situation, but at £1200 it was also the cheapest and most capable of being extended. The choice having been made, the committee were now able to pursue their enquiries further. 28 corn dealers in the district confirmed that they would take stands at £3. 3s. 0d. per year. The Commissioners of Woods and Forests were not permitted to sell the market tolls, but they offered to lease them on behalf of the Crown for 31 years at £50 per annum to "Gentlemen of substance and responsibility". Thus by the spring of 1851 all seemed set for the formation of the Hitchin Market Company. Thomas Whiting was appointed its first secretary and Hawkins & Company its Solicitors.

In 1834 there had been an attempt to revive the wool trade, dating from medieval times, by holding a wool fair on June 26th. Over 24,000 fleeces were offered for sale in Bancroft and 250 farmers lunched at the Sun Hotel. Now with the new company in prospect, advertisements for another wool fair produced promises of 20,000 fleeces. A local architect William Beck was instructed to prepare a site plan and to advertise in the London Times for the best design with a prize of £50. Mr Beck, however, realising the local prestige attached to such a commission, offered to submit a gratuitous design. The market company accepted this offer and he was soon afterwards appointed as architect for a new corn exchange. When tenders for the building were opened on April 18th 1852 that of Mr Jeeves, in the sum of £2,600, was accepted. Work started on the site almost at once, and the building was opened just over 11 months later on 22nd March 1853. The design was somewhat unusual, even Italianate in style, with a cupola to house the market bell on top. The building attracted the attention of the London Illustrated News, which commented on 23rd April 1853 "the edifices of a nation are among the most prominent characteristics of its social condition; and no clearer proof can be given of the progress of general improvement than the rise of those public buildings in small country places which have so long been limited in the cities and large towns of the kingdom. These remarks are suggested by the recent opening of a new and spacious corn exchange at Hitchin, Hertfordshire. A joint stock company has now furnished the dealer in corn with that shelter from the weather and facility for the transaction of business which he has so long wanted".

The Market Company, having acquired a 31 year lease of the market tolls from the Crown, was also able to ensure the economic running of the Corn Exchange by collecting all tolls for stalls, booths, livestock and goods sold in the market. Shops which put agricultural implements for sale outside on the pavement were also liable for toll. At that time the Market Place was still partially covered by buildings on the northern side, and a meeting was now called to consider removing those that remained after the clearance made in 1829. The total cost of this scheme was £1,600 and the square was finally cleared in 1856.

At about the same time there was a movement to get the livestock market, which for centuries had been held in Bancroft, moved to a more suitable site off the town's main street. In 1857 proposals were made to transfer the cattle market to an area between West Lane and Old Park Row (later Road). In May that year Papers of an offensive and personal character circulated in the town concerning the removal of the cattle market to a new site. Robert Street, the Hitchin pamphleteer and watchmaker, gave it as his opinion "that if a new approach was made from the town to the railway station by pulling down the house now occupied by the Rev. J.F. Stuart, and making a new road from there to the lodge (later Hermitage Road) it would improve the market and town".

At this period in the history of the livestock market there seems to have been something of an increase in the sale of sheep but a decrease in those of pigs; generally speaking, however, the administration of the market was not proving as profitable as had been hoped. In 1872 part of the yard at the rear of the Exchange was leased to the publishers of the Hertfordshire Express. William Carling, the owner, had for the last four years been sharing the premises of John Shilcock in the Market Square,

There were continual complaints of the noise of the market in the 1870s and so in 1876 it was decided that no stall should in future be occupied after 10 p.m. on a Saturday night. There was also anger at the setting out of the hurdles in Bancroft during the night.

In 1881 the firm of T.W. & P. Franklin, founded at Graveley about 1860, purchased the business of John Farmer & Company and took over the tenancy of the office adjoining the entrance to the Corn Exchange. Franklins had initially traded in wool, and Thomas Warren Franklin and his brother Phillip soon realised the importance of Hitchin market to the wool trade. This prompted them to acquire premises adjoining the Corn Exchange, and it was the close proximity of this building that prompted their interest in the grain market.

In 1882 the 31 year lease of the market tolls by the Crown to the Market Company expired. Since that lease had been granted, two new pieces of government legislation had gone on to the Statute Book dealing with markets. The Local Government Act of 1858 gave corporate boroughs power to establish and control their own markets, and the Public Health Act of 1875 extended those powers to the Urban Districts. Thus it was that on 21st June 1882 the Local Board of Health at Hitchin called for a public meeting to consider "the propriety of purchasing the tolls of Hitchin market under the Public Health Act of 1875". The Crown had already announced in an advertisement in the Hertfordshire Express its intention to sell the market tolls of Hitchin. Enquiry had elicited that the tolls must be sold by public auction, and it seems that the Market Company and the Local Board failed to agree any joint arrangements for the purchase. A meeting of the rate-payers was therefore held in the Town Hall at 8 P.m. on 28th June 1882 at which it was unanimously decided to bid for the market tolls. The next day the Local Board resolved "that the Clerk (W.O. Times) be instructed to purchase the market tolls at the forthcoming sale in accordance with the rate-payers resolution". The auction was held on 4th July and the clerk's final bid of £4,000 proved successful. This caused a certain amount of ill feeling with the Market Company, who were now deprived of one of their main sources of income. Soon afterwards they increased their charges for the use of the Corn Exchange committee room by the Local Board. On 27th September the Local Board set up a committee to enquire into the market toils and to collect information on the scale of tolls and Stallages.

The following month they purchased all the market stalls and other effects from the Market Company for £67. 12s, 2d. The Board also leased the company building in which these items were stored and employed Mr Samuel G. Parker, the secretary, as their collector of market tolls at £40 p.a. until 21st April, 1883.

In November it was discovered that a portion of the Market Place was owned by the Office of Woods and Forests. The Local Government Board's agreement to the sale of the tolls therefore could not be settled until the matter was cleared up. The piece of ground in question was that on which the last of the houses removed in 1856 had stood. The Solicitor acting for the Crown arranged to convey it to the Local Board, and this resolved the matter. Final sanction to borrow the £4,000 needed to purchase the tolls was given in February 1883, and the Local Board advertised in the London Times for a loan repayment over 50 years. The money was eventually raised locally by the issue of £100 bonds at 4%, repayable with six months notice.

Fears of insolvency no doubt prompted the shareholders of the Market Company to become a Limited Liability Company in 1883. That same year the directors fitted turnstiles and charged an entrance fee of two pence. The turnstiles proved to be most unpopular, and with business declining the Company offered to sell the Exchange to the Local Board. The rate-payers voted against the purchase leaving the Company in a difficult position for which they only had themselves to blame. The directors found themselves assailed on all sides, but particularly by the stallholders who felt the imposition of an entrance toll would do them serious injury by keeping out their customers. A resolution was passed by a meeting of stallholders asking for the turnstiles to be removed, failing which the stalls would be given up. This was laid before the directors on November 5th. There was even talk of building another Corn Exchange, but it all came to nought. The contentious turnstiles remained for 14 years until being finally removed in 1897; the stallholders continued to do their business in the Exchange throughout those years.

1883 also saw further efforts to get the livestock market removed from Bancroft. A memorial signed by 171 farmers, dealers, and rate-payers was sent to the Local Board urging removal to a new site in June. They responded by resolving to ascertain on what terms Trinity College would grant a lease of Crabbs Close or sell it for use as a stock market. There were further memorials urging removal in the weeks which followed, but again, nothing came of it.

Under the provisions of the Markets and Fairs Act of 1883 the Local Board now found that a weighing machine had to be provided for weighing the animals in the livestock market. The members were not overstruck with this idea, Hitchin having managed without one for the last 1000 years or so. They therefore instructed their Clerk to ascertain the intention of other towns to comply with the Act. But finding that Cambridge, Bedford and Luton were purchasing machines they decided Hitchin too must have one. A weighing machine was accordingly purchased from Hart & Co. for £32. 10s. 0d., and the Surveyor was instructed "to put the machine in some suitable place", under the direction of the Highways and Market Tolls Committee. The first site chosen was in the sheep market (i.e. Portmill Lane to Hermitage Road) near the end of Hermitage Road. It had only been installed a fortnight when the residents of Bancroft requested its removal. The Board having bought the wretched thing now dug their toes in and resolved that it should "remain in its present position experimentally for three months". It stayed there for many years!

The Local Board may have purchased the market tolls, but the Manor was still held by the Crown, and the Court Leet still controlled the tolls of local fairs. The Board, regretting this ancient imposition on their growing muscular power, directed their Clerk to write to the Foreman of the Court Leet in August 1890, regretting that the Court had seen fit to "Let Butts Close to a company travelling with a steam organ and roundabouts". It had caused considerable annoyance to those living in the vicinity of the Close! In June 1892 the Board discovered that pigs were being sold in the Great Northern and Midland Railway yards without coming into the market and paying proper tolls. Then there were complaints that Bancroft was being blocked by sheep pens on market days.

In November 1900 an Inspector of the Board of Agriculture told the Urban District Council, which had now succeeded the Local Board, that in order to avoid the closing of the Bancroft market, the street must be satisfactorily paved or the market removed from the streets. In May 1902, losing patience with the Council's apparent lack of action, the Board of Agriculture issued a closing order on the cattle, sheep and swine markets in the streets with effect from 1st October. The Council called a special meeting to consider the situation on May 15th, when it was decided "that being in the opinion of the Council undesirable to pave the streets of the Town, no action be taken until another effort has been made to acquire suitable land for a market". They agreed to approach once again Trinity College for an acre of land in West Lane. As the Council had no alternative but to comply with the closing order, it was decided to ask for the Order to be suspended for three months to allow time for negotiating with Trinity College.

In November terms were finally agreed with Trinity, and a further meeting of owners and rate-payers was called for 27th of the month, when plans and estimates were to be presented. The outcome of this meeting was to authorise the Council "to do all or some of the following things":-

- 1. To take on lease for a term of not less than 99 years a piece of land with the buildings thereon forming part of Nuns Close in Paynes Park at a rent not exceeding £40 p.a. for the purposes of holding a market.
- 2. To provide all such matters and things as may be necessary for the convenient use of such market.
- 3. To take stallages, rents and tolls in respect of the use by any person of such market.

(86 voted in favour of this authorisation, 22 against)

On 6th January 1903 an event occurred which at last spurred all concerned into action. The little son of Rev. B.N. Switzer, a Curate of St. Marys Church, was tossed by a frightened cow in Bancroft on market day. But although public opinion was outraged, the Council complacently replied to the anxious father's suggestion that a regulation should be made concerning the proper control of animals in the streets, that they had "no power to enforce such a regulation"!

By March a draft lease had been submitted for the new market, and terms were agreed by early April. All documents were sealed in June but with some amendment as to the terms for the licensed salesmen and auctioneers. August saw the site being staked out, and over the next few months the work of building the new livestock market proceeded. Another amendment of the Closing Order has to be made in September, when the date was further amended to 1st January 1904. New charges were agreed for the market in December 1903 and on 15th of that month the new livestock market was ready for public inspection, and was used for the first time for business on Tuesday 5th January 1904. With the new market complete, the Council resolved that a byelaw be made to prevent the danger of cows with calves at foot being driven along the highway and streets, and to ask the Hertfordshire County Council to pass a similar byelaw for the streets and highways they controlled in the town.

The Council also purchased plots No. 18 and 19 in Old Park Road to give them access to the Lairage ground behind the cattle market.

Mention must especially be made to the weekly Tuesday lunch held for the farmers at The Sun and The Angel Inn. These lunches were first held at The Sun but later, when that took on a less commercial character in the 20th century, the farmers met at The Angel. Lunch was available for 2/6d up until that sad night when the old timbers of The Angel gave way and the Inn fell into the street. The great joints of beef and mutton were always carved by a distinguished personage from the Corn Exchange, and there was always a wide choice set out on the long table in the upstairs room. In the days when the farmers lunched at The Sun, they presented the retiring publican, William Hill, with a

portrait of himself to mark his 35 years as host. That was in July 1869, and for many years the portrait by a Hertford artist hung in the dining room at The Sun. Another tradition dating from the opening of the Corn Exchange at Hitchin, but practiced in most grain exchanges on the last market day before Christmas, was the Annual Brokers" Pelting Rag. The Brokers in the exchange used to pelt one another with their samples and behaviour became very riotous. One Christmas, windows were broken in the Hitchin Exchange during these revels. But alas, the practice died out in 1929 after a man was killed at the Mark Lane Exchange in London.

In 1907 the Exchange Hall was being used for Badminton and that same year was the scene of a riotous meeting when suffragettes were fighting for the vote; police horses had to make a baton charge down High Street to clear the crowds. The directors passed a resolution that they would not allow roller skating, but 30 years later the Exchange became a skating rink,

At one point in 1910 there was a special meeting to consider turning the hall into a cinema, but nothing came of it, and three years later The Playhouse opened next door. In the First World War a big Red Cross auction was held in the building in 1915 and on March 28th the following year considerable storm damage was done. After the war, the directors purchased the adjoining leasehold interest of Perkins Ironworks, and two years later the old foundry was considered for a covered market, but nothing was done to implement it.

Between the wars the general market continued to flourish on Tuesdays and Saturdays in the square in front of the Corn Exchange. Traffic continued to flow diagonally across, between High Street and Sun Street, passing slowly between the lines of stalls around which crowded the many bargain hunters. In the winter months when it grew dark, the stallholders lit their acetylene burners and trading continued in the flickering light. There was an attempt in 1930 to use the Corn Exchange for miniature golf, but this somehow was not a success. Even when gas heating was installed in 1935 and the building warmed for the first time since being built, the Corn Exchange never really became any more the success that its sponsor had once hoped. The sad fact was that Hitchin's Grain and Wool market was in a slow but serious decline. With the outbreak of the Second World War, there began a gradual change in the whole concept of Hitchin's weekly markets. To begin with, the general market was moved to St. Mary's Square, where it would no longer interrupt the ever increasing flow of traffic, albeit temporarily reduced by the onset of war. The Old Market Square no longer saw the hustle and bustle of a country market. Instead, it became the parking space for the motor car. In 1941 the Corn Exchange was converted into a British Restaurant, to provide cheap and nutritious meals to augment the severe wartime rationing. Even the cattle market was slowly declining. By 1960 the wool trade had gone entirely from Hitchin, and ten years later grain sales deteriorated to such an extent that the Corn Exchange was closed, and only T.W. & P. Franklin remained of the once proud grain market of Elizabeth the First.

For the general market, the 1960s and 70s were really a re-birth. The whole pattern of shopping and retailing was in a state of flux with the ever increasing numbers of supermarkets and the gradual extinction of the small trader. The new town of Stevenage gave new life to Hitchin's general market, as the many Londoners who came to live there found in the St. Mary's Square market something of the flavour of Petticoat Lane and the London street markets. The people flocked to Hitchin by the hundred on Tuesdays and Saturdays, filling the huge square to overflowing.

In 1973 a new shopping precinct and permanent market stalls were opened on the site of Spurr's shop and St. Mary's School, filling up what was once the town's Great Yard. Thus began a new era in the story of Hitchin Market, a story which had begun at least a thousand years earlier.

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Notes

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- 3 Victoria History of Hertfordshire (1912) Vol. III
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